

Unitarian Universalists of Benton County
Meeting Notes of 27 September 09

Lighting the chalice

We light this flame as the warmth of friendship, as the light of knowledge, and as the glow of compassion. May it guide us truly in our time together this morning.

Opening Words

Singing the Living Tradition No. 445, "The Womb of Stars" by Joy Atkinson, a UU minister

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins.

We are of the stars, the dust of the explosions cast across space.

We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts.

Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts.

Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us.

We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar.

We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage.

May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

Welcome

- My name is Jeff Tate. For more about why I'm the one standing here, please see the back of the bulletin
- Sixth meeting of UUBC; we took the summer off
 - Will find it interesting and enjoyable, and will find one or two new ideas about spirituality
 - Will find this meeting to be a spiritual experience
 - Will meet others here who share your interest in spiritual development
 - May inspire you to want to be a part of a new liberal religious congregation for the people of Benton County
- Put suggestions on index card onto lectern

What is Unitarian Universalism?

- UU is a religious *denomination* tied to no one particular religion; there is no UU creed or dogma
- UU looks to all religions, philosophies, and sciences as sources of spiritual knowledge and wisdom
- No need to renounce any religion or denomination
 - UU Christians, UU Buddhists, UU Jews, UU Humanists
 - All those who feel they have come to the point of developing spiritually beyond any *dogma* about what is true and good
- UU is about 200 years old. About 1000 congregations in the US, with about 100,000 members; about 800,000 members worldwide. In the US, about 629,000 persons self-identify as UUs though most don't belong to any congregation. Many of this county's leading intellectuals have been UU.

•More complete description and history is in the UU brochure available at the end of this meeting

What is UUBC?

- The beginning of a large, thriving UU church serving the people of Benton Co. as a home for spiritual enlightenment with spiritual freedom
- Will start small and grow as quickly as our human resources allow
- Monthly Sunday services and monthly social events
- Has the support of UUFF and of Susan Smith, our UUA DE

Andrew Cohen, editor, *Enlightenext* magazine: “For those of us looking toward the future who are spiritually inclined, it is often difficult to find a path or practice that makes *deep* sense. What I mean is, it’s difficult to find a spiritual path that has a truly contemporary orientation—one that doesn’t compel us to embrace ancient belief structures that may no longer be relevant to our time. That is why I believe we need to create a new context for our individual and collective spiritual development, one that is appropriate for our twenty-first-century circumstances.”

• UUBC is about creating that new context for spiritual development in Benton County. I hope *you* will decide to be a part of it.

Guided Meditation

What is meditation? Meditation is turning our attention away from thinking about the world to become more aware of the pure consciousness that we are in our essence. Zen is one such type of meditation. Zen uses simple techniques to help us focus our attention on our basic, uncluttered consciousness, our basic ground of awareness. For that is what we are in essence: caring, understanding, awareness.

Regularly refocusing our attention on that basic substrate of consciousness, present before particular thoughts, has benefits. For one thing it reduces tension and worry by helping us keep a more realistic perspective on daily concerns. In daily living it can seem as though all that there is to us are the roles that we play: father, mother, worker, caregiver, consumer. We wonder where is the real me. Becoming more aware of your basic pre-role consciousness has a “centering” effect that is calming and stabilizing.

Another benefit of meditation is its effects on mental maturation. As we meditate, especially in the first few months, neurotic hang-ups inevitably come to the surface in our thoughts. In the meditative state we have a chance to observe those hang-ups, see them more realistically, and automatically reduce their impact on our daily life. This is sometimes called *shadow work*, and is much like the effect of journaling regularly.

•Now, let’s try doing together a brief guided meditation. We will use a standard Zen meditation technique, designed to help you move away from the endless chatter of thoughts in your mind, and move toward the silence of your basic awareness, your fundamental consciousness within which everything else happens.

•So: Get comfortable in your chair. Close your eyes. Breathe. Breathe slowly and deeply. Focus your attention on your breathing. Breathe in slowly; breathe out slowly. Now, begin to count each breath. As you breathe in silently count one . . . as you breathe out silently count two . . . as you breathe in count three . . . as you breathe out count four . . . continue to count your breaths, focusing your attention as strongly as you can on each breath and on its number. After you count nine, on the next breath start over with one. . . Continue to count, focusing on the sensation of each breath and on its number. . . . Now,

look for the little blank space *between* the numbers, between breaths. As you finish thinking one number, and just before you start to think the next number, there is a moment of silence in your mind. As you breathe in and out, counting each breath, look for that moment of silence *between* each breath. . . . Concentrate on that silent moment, and make it a little longer. . . . Now, count as you inhale, but hold onto that little in-between silence as you exhale without counting. So now you are counting every other breath, with a quiet mind between each number. . . . Now, begin to hold on to that moment of silence without counting at all for as many breathes as you can. If you start to have distracting thoughts during the silence, then start to count every breath again for a little while now slowly open your eyes.

•Practice this meditation 20 minutes a day. You will find that during meditation the periods of mental silence become longer and more peaceful. You will become more aware of the ground of consciousness that is your essence. You will find that throughout the day your emotions are calmer. You will find a new, higher, perspective from which you understand the events in your life. You may begin to sense that your essence of consciousness is almost identical to the consciousness of the bird you see flying. You may begin to sense that both your consciousness and that of the bird are manifestations, enfoldings, intensifications, of the basic ground of interior experience that exists in the space between you and the bird and throughout the Cosmos.

Reading

Singing the Living Tradition No. 612, "Fearful Joy" by Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu intellectual who became Asia's first Nobel laureate by winning the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature.

"Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm?
To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?"

"All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on.

"Keeping step with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away.

"Colors, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment."

Story

"The Fig Seed"

adapted from the *Upanishads* (Hindu holy writings) by Sophia Lyon Fahs in the book *From Long Ago and Many Lands*

Once upon a time in the very long ago the boy, Svetakatu, lived in India. He was the oldest son of a wise and good man. When Svetakatu was twelve years old his father said to him: "My son, you are now old enough to go away from home to school. I want you to live for a while with a certain famous teacher whom I know. There are many things to learn that you have not yet even heard of. I want you to learn to ask questions about matters that are hard to understand. I want you to learn to think with your own mind while you listen to other people's thoughts. Svetakatu, some day you should be a teacher yourself."

So Svetakatu left home and lived for several years in the school of one of the great teachers of India. While he was away he read from the great books. He learned by heart many long prayers. He learned to sing the great songs to praise Brahman (one of the Hindu gods). Finally, after learning all he thought he needed to know, Svetakatu returned home. His father was more than happy to see his son again. But as they talked together, the father noticed how proud Svetakatu was of himself. The boy thought he knew more than his father. Svetakatu thought he knew all there was to learn! The father was puzzled. He thought: "How can I help my boy to realize how little he really knows?"

One day the two went for a stroll in the country. They came to a grove of fig trees and sat down together on some rocks at the bank of a river. After a short while the father said to Svetakatu:

"My son, since you now think you have learned so much and you are proud and conceited, I want to ask you a question. Have you learned how something that has never been heard can be heard? Or have you learned how something that has never been thought of can be thought of? Have you learned how something that has never been understood can be understood?"

Svetakatu replied: "No father, tell me how."

So the father said: "I will teach you, my son. Bring me a fig from that fig tree." The son rose and picked a fig from the tree and brought it to his father.

"Here it is, sir."

"Cut it open," said his father.

"I have cut it open," said the son.

"What do you see there?"

"Oh, some small seeds, sir."

"Cut one of the seeds open."

"I have cut one open, sir."

"What do you see there?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Now, Svetakatu, you know that there must be something there. You know that this great fig tree here grew from just such a little seed."

"Yes, father, I know."

"Then did the tree grow from nothing?"

"It must be," said Svetakatu.

"You mean, Svetakatu, that what is alive, that made the great tree grow and bear figs, you cannot see?"

"It must be so," said the son.

"Then you should know also, Svetakatu, that not just in the fig seed, but everywhere, there is that which is alive which no one can see. The fig tree could never have grown without the life in that seed. And that life is invisible. You cannot see it. Nothing in the world can be without that invisible and living part from which it comes.

"Svetakatu, my son, the Invisible everywhere in the world is the divine in the world. It is God. It is Spirit. It is life-it is your life"

Homily: "**Hinduism: Many Paths to the Same Summit**"

by the Rev. Carolyn S. Owen-Towle (adapted)

Do you know how Unitarians got their name? It was an epithet hurled at Transylvanians who believed in one, not three Gods. You 'Unitarians'! they were called. And it stuck! Hindus are followers of a religion known as Hinduism. This major world religion, one of the oldest, going back some 3,000 years, was given its name by Western scholars in the 19th century, from the old Persian word, Hindu, for the river that was the boundary between Persian and India. Hindus themselves call their code of beliefs sanatana dharma, which means 'eternal law' or 'eternal teaching'. The point is that neither faith chose its name.

There are about one billion Hindus in the world. About 90% live in India, where 80% of people are of this faith. Wherever Hindus settle, and they have settled all over the world, they have taken their beliefs with them.

Hinduism as a way of life presents one with a regimen for insuring health and prosperity. Hindus hold that people want four basic things in life: the first two lie on the Path of Desire. Number one, is pleasure. While not the most important desire, considering the alternative --pain -- pleasure is a natural craving. As long as the basic rules of morality are observed one is free to seek all the pleasure they want. The world is awash with beauty and heavy with sensual delights. One should enjoy such earthly bounty. Moreover there are worlds above this one where pleasures increase by a factor of a million at each rung. But, I'll return to that later.

Eventually, it is understood, one will want more than pleasure seeking. Eventually, one tends to find pleasure too trivial to fully satisfy. One wants more than pleasant sensation and seeks a second thing: notably *success* -- success in the form of wealth, fame and power. Success is a requisite for supporting a household and honoring one's civic commitments. This usually comes in young adulthood beginning around the age of 25. And yet it is understood that wealth, fame and success bring their own limitations. It's made clear that while pleasure and success are located on the Path of Desire, we must mature in our desires and not dwell in them at a juvenile level.

The remaining two desires lie on the Path of Renunciation. You've heard of the Peter Pan syndrome? Hinduism holds that those who solely desire pleasure and success are those who don't grow up. They play the game of desire with all the self-centered zest of nine-year-olds. While some die sure that life has been well lived, others find such a life lacking in depth and meaning. All true religion begins with the quest for meaning and value beyond ones self-centered person. The idea of renunciation comes into play when the individual begins to seek a spiritual life.

The first desire on the Path of Renunciation is *Community*. The community has an importance no individual life can command. To transfer our allegiance from self to community is to give community priority over our own egos. The parallels here between mature Hinduism and mature Unitarian Universalism are significant. We too say that to give oneself to civic and religious community is a sign that we are seeking meaning beyond our own desires. People relinquish the will to 'get' to the will to 'give', the will to 'win' to the will to 'serve'. Hinduism proffers many directives to those who pursue community. It details duties appropriate to age, to different temperaments and to social status, not unlike UU culture and faith. Hindu pointers are in the forms of stories and scriptures. Faithful performance of duties brings respect and gratitude from one's peers. More importantly, fulfillment of duty brings one *self*-respect from having done one's share.

But, as life goes on, what people really want isn't pleasure, success and duty to community. What Hindus really want is to be, to know, and to be happy. No one wants to die in the dark about things or to be miserable. We want to be fully alive to life in all of its aspects. Pleasure, Success and Duty are only windows through which we glimpse our true wants.

The fourth and truest desire is *Liberation*. By this is meant liberation from everything that distances us from infinite being, from infinite awareness and infinite bliss. Hinduism tells us to our surprise, that everything we want, we can have. Actually, we already have it. This faith says underlying the human self, and animating it, is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted and is unrestricted in consciousness and bliss. The infinite center of every life is a hidden self or Atman. Our depths, our hidden selves are no less than Brahman, or the Godhead.

But, if we are all infinite in our being why don't we perceive this? The answer lies in the depth at which the eternal is buried within us, camouflaged by distractions, delusions, and self-serving instincts. Our task is to cleanse our lives to allow the consciousness and bliss within to fully radiate. Hindu literature, the Upanishads for instance, is studded with metaphors that are designed to awaken us to the realms of gold that are hidden in the depths of our being. This is like the story of the person who roams the earth to find a hidden treasure only to discover, when at last they return home weary and disillusioned, that it is buried under their very own hearth. Hinduism tells us we carry life's creative power within us but it is deeply hidden.

For Hindus, working to actualize this human potential comes under the heading of yoga. Yoga is a method of training designed to lead to integration or union with the ultimate consciousness of the universe, which they call Brahman. Yoga includes physical exercises but its ultimate goal is union with Brahman. Hinduism recognizes that there are multiple paths to Brahman. Four paths are delineated, one for the reflective personality, one for the emotional, one for the active and energetic, and one for the experimental. There is a different yoga practice for each. One must lead with his/her strongest characteristic knowing that the strengths of all four paths Brahman overlap. The aim of yoga is to seek our deep-lying divinity by cleansing ourselves of bad habits and negative traits.

There is one great Truth, but many paths to truth. There is one great God, but many forms that God takes, making Hinduism both monotheistic and polytheistic. Oneness and many-ness are not seen as true opposites. Hindu polytheism is simultaneously one of the most significant and one of the most difficult matters for us Westerners to grasp in attempting to understand Hindu religious life. If something is important it is seen from many angles. This is certainly true of God. Hindus perceive the many-ness of the Divine.

You have seen pictures of numerous Hindu gods, gods such as Indra, riding across the sky on his white battle elephant. Indra was the god of war, famous for his bravery and strength. His was also the god of storms and thunder. You have seen Brahma. Brahma has four faces, showing that he rules over the four points of the compass. Brahma also has four arms, in which are held the sacred books and the rosary and water flask of a holy man. He is the god of wisdom. His wife is Saraswati, the goddess of art, music and literature. She holds a book and a musical instrument in her hand. There is Vishnu, the protector of the universe. Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and good fortune, Shiva, energetically dancing as he destroys the world. As Shiva dances, he treads the dwarf of

ignorance underfoot. Kali is the bloodthirsty death-seeking goddess, and Durga, the goddess of war. Like many Hindu deities, Parvati is a mixture of good and evil, kindness and cruelty, life and death.

But: listen to the words of a Hindu song:

"Those who say that Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma are respectively the Preserver, the Destroyer and the Creator of this whole Universe do not know anything. All the three are created by you; then they perform always their respective functions; their sole refuge being yourself."

Remember, the Godhead is the ultimate.

Krishna, is another popular Hindu god. He is famous for his mischievous nature and for the tricks he plays on his friends. He's also surrounded by cows and by milkmaids. Enough of gods, though there are countless others.

Family life is very important to Hindus, big extended families including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and children all together. Often this religion is taught through stories from the mother and grandmother of the family. Children are taught respect for their elders.

Hindus are divided into four classes, or castes, traditionally based on the jobs they do. The highest caste is that of the Brahmins, or priests. Next come Kshatriyas--the warriors and nobles. Below them are Vaishyas, or merchants, then Shudras, or ordinary laborers. A fifth group of people is considered to be outside the caste system because they do the dirtiest jobs. One is born into a particular caste, but after one dies one can be reborn into a higher caste, depending on one's karma.

There are many different ways of being a Hindu, just as there are in being a Unitarian Universalist. There are no set rules. But most Hindus share the same basic beliefs. One important belief is reincarnation, in which one's soul is reborn in another body, human or animal, when they die. Many Westerners share in this belief. One can be reborn many times, in a cycle of death and rebirth called samsara. The aim of a Hindu's life is to break free of this cycle and to reach moksha, or salvation. By leading a good life, one can be reborn into a higher form and move closer to moksha. That upward movement is where pleasures, I mentioned earlier, increase by a factor of a million at each rung. On the subhuman level the passage up the rungs of existence proceeds automatically; the soul is on an escalator, so to speak, and ascends through increasingly complex animal forms until a human body is attained. With this fulfillment things change dramatically. For the first time, the individual knows him/herself, and with one's awareness come freedom and responsibility. But this ascension depends on one's actions and their results, which are known as karma. Karma has to do with cause and effect. As we would say, 'as ye sow so shall you reap'. If you do the right thing, are giving and good to others chances are your karma will improve throughout your life. Concern for one's karma serves as an effective incentive to live right, doesn't it?

Never during its pilgrimage, according to the Hindu, is the human spirit alone. From start to finish, God is one's constant companion, the 'Friend who understands'. To the Hindu, the world is seen as benign. There is no permanent hell or eternal damnation. The world may be loved without fear, as long as we don't try to convert it to our ends. This worldview reflects Unitarian Universalism as well. Hinduism tells us that we live in a multiple layered world that includes innumerable galaxies, tiers and cycles. We live in a moral world in which the law of karma is unavoidable. We live in a middling world that

will never replace paradise; a tricky world, a world for soul making, and an untiring, unending yet beneficent world born of infinite vitality.

The path to God is Hinduism's way. Whether *your* path is to God or to truth or to some other spiritual end, you may be entreated by this faith to live with joy, with devotion, with knowledge and right action. And may your way be blessed. Namaste.

Discussion: read highlights from Wikipedia article

- What do you think of the Hindu idea of reincarnation? Is this a metaphor for evolution? How do *you* define what happens after this life?
- What do Unitarian Universalism and Hinduism have in common? How are our belief systems the same and how are they different?
- What do you think of the many paths that lead to the same place? Do you think this is true and why might this be true or false for you? Can all religions lead to the same place?

Closing Words

From *Singing the Living Tradition* No. 529, "The Stream of Life" by Rabindranath Tagore

“The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

“It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

“It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

“I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.”

Closing

Thank you for coming today. If you enjoyed this meeting; if you like the idea of liberal religion or spirituality, free from dogma, where open discussion and questioning are encouraged, then I hope you will leave us your contact information—name, telephone number, email address. We will notify you of upcoming UUBC meetings and social activities. Together, we can build a new home for liberal religion in Benton County. Please help to spread the word about UUBC! Please put suggestions on your index card and leave on this lecturn.

Snuffing of the chalice

May the light of compassion, knowledge, and wisdom shine through each of us, here and everywhere.

Coffee and Conversation